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C O N F I D E N T I A L CARACAS 003173

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NSC FOR CBARTON
HQ SOUTHCOM FOR POLAD

E.O. 12958: DECL: 09/22/2014

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [MOPS](#) [VE](#)

SUBJECT: RUMORS STILL SPINNING ON APURE AMBUSH

REF: CARACAS 03032

Classified By: POLITICAL COUNSELOR ABELARDO A. ARIAS FOR 1.4 (D)

Summary

1. (C) Summary: The media has continued to report on the killing of a PDVSA engineer and five soldiers in Apure State. The opposition and the Colombian Government continue to fault the government for complicity in border violence. The GOV and its supporters have blamed the United States and Colombia for the attacks. Former PDVSA workers have cast doubt on the official line that the victims constituted an oil exploration team. Both the opposition and the GOV likely expect to benefit from the publicity. The true identity of the attackers may never surface publicly. End summary.

2. (C) The media has stretched the news thin to keep the story on the September 17 Apure State ambush (REFTEL) running. The national press has begun to report even the discovery of corpses in neighboring Tachira state in order to continue the body count. On September 30, the press ran a story simply to say that the National Assembly's defense committee continued to investigate the murders.

Trading Accusations

3. (C) Accusations leveled by the Venezuelan and Colombian Governments continued to give life to the story. In the latest round of a verbal row between Venezuelan Vice President Jose Vicente Rangel and Colombian members of congress, Rangel, accused of engaging in "verbal terrorism," blamed Colombians on September 29 for ignoring the border problem. The Governor of Colombia's Arauca department, which borders Apure, blamed the GOV on 30 September for supporting the Colombian insurgency. On October 5, secretary of the Venezuelan National Defense Council (CDN) Gen. Melvin Lopez Hidalgo said at a university forum on Plan Colombia that he suspected Colombian paramilitaries were receiving US training, although he stopped short of indicating that Washington intended to use such forces.

4. (C) GOV press outlets have also kept the story alive. The Bolivarian Liberation Forces (FBL) garnered front-page coverage in the pro-Government tabloid Diario Vea October 1 by announcing they would suspend operations, adding that the "empire" was blaming the FBL for its own bloody attacks. A pro-Chavez website on September 29 cited a joint declaration by Colombian social organizations blaming the White House for the ambush. The FARC, meanwhile, has sent a communique to the press accusing the Colombian Army.

5. (U) The pro-opposition media, meanwhile, has cited local ranchers, indigenous people, and clergy who fault the government for the lack of security at the border states. The CD on October 8 responded to the FBL's article by asking the Attorney General's office to investigate links between the FBL, Diario Vea, and the government. Striking a less confrontational tone, ranching association FEDENAGA during a September 30 press conference said Chavez's September 22 speech to troops in Apure opened space for dialog after 28 years of insecurity in the region. (The first kidnapping took place in 1976, according to FEDENAGA.)

Oil exploration?

6. (C) A former PDVSA executive told PolOff September 29 that the victims probably were not in the area for oil exploration. A larger group with seismic equipment would have characterized a true exploration mission, he said, adding that even a less formal scouting party would have had experienced geologists. Defense Minister Gen. Garcia Carneiro told the press that authorities were seeking a member of the group who incriminated himself in the attack because he fled the scene just prior to the ambush.

Comment

17. (C) As noted by the NGOs, the attack is representative of the everyday violence in Venezuela's "wild west," which is rarely publicized at a national level and almost never punished. This time, however, the attacks have become a publicity bonanza for both the GOV and the opposition. The opposition is using the incident to blame the government for harboring terrorists, ignoring border violence, and damaging military morale. The border problem has also become the latest GOV bugbear, serving as a convenient reminder to the Venezuelan public that it has an external enemy in the United States, Plan Colombia, and ill-defined "neoliberal" plotting. The GOV also continues to treat the issue in attempts to reassure the public it controls both the border and its own troops.

18. (C) The GOV's unwillingness to rule out the FARC as the culprit in these attacks suggest that the Colombian guerrillas really were at fault and that the GOV knows it. If the PDVSA official's comments and the account of the fleeing victim are true, the soldiers likely were in the region to conduct some kind of business with one of the armed groups.
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